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ABSTRACT

Western notions of right and wrong have dominated consideration of ethical issues in various domestic and remote cultural environments. A review of eight generalizations put forth by rhetorician Richard Johannesen on the ethics of rhetoric indicates that many scholars in contemporary speech communication believe that for people in other cultures to make ethical decisions they must think the way Westerners believe that Westerners think. Rhetorical attempts to find universal ethical principles have consisted of a quest for universal values. While values differ crossculturally, the "process" of applying values may be similar across cultures. Ethics, then, are techniques by which one attemtps to make certain values work appropriately. The classic error of rhetoric in dealing with morality has been to confuse ethics and values. To seek out ethical practices, the first step is to view a culture's value system as a frame of reference. Processual or ethical elements viable in any culture include (1) intent, (2) a gap between morality and ethics (the code differs from its application), (3) individual levels of values application, (4) societal flexibility of application, and (5) social utility of ethical behavior. Knowing that ethics are not situational but that values are, scholars must replace the term "situational ethics" with "situational values," which will then make possible the productive crosscultural study of ethics. (HTH)

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CARRYING ETHICAL CONCEPTS ACROSS CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

(A paper for presentation at the Speech Communication Association Annual Meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, November 4 - 7, 1982)

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Introduction

Why have we made so little progress in the cross-cultural study of ethics? One possible cause is our inability to achieve a truly multi-cultural perspective.

In considering ethical issues in various domestic and remote cultural environments we have permitted Western notions of right and wrong to dominate our thinking. Further, we have been handicapped by limiting ourselves to a rhetorical approach to intercultural communication.

We have attempted to apply our principles of rhetoric as though they were universals, valid in all contexts. Expecting all the world's peoples to communicate in ways that our rhetorical analysis can interpret has produced frustration and added little to mutual understanding.

The rhetorician finds it difficult to accept that all ethical decisions are unique because they are made by individuals IN CONTEXT. Viewed operationally, ethical motivations are contingent and perceptual, the result of one person's responses to a clip of time. Any person behaving ethically may never make a similar ethical choice again.

Ethical decisions resolve what Mason and Mitroff term "wicked" problems.[1] In contrast to "tame" problems, "wicked" problems never give us enough evidence nor enough time. There are no right answers and the problem

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has not happened before and never re-occurs. The ethical decision is a product of a unique pattern of circumstances, and is given validity only by the intuitive judgment of the maker of the decision. Rhetoric deals with norms, central tendencies, and is fine for handling tame problems which have sufficient information and right answers. Rhetoric does not equip us to cope with the impulsive contingent elements that are of central importance in the actual making of ethical decisions.

In speech communication ethics has been treated as a subdivision of rhetoric so long that the idea of an approach to ethics other than the rhetorical seems very strange indeed. But the need to go beyond rhetoric can be demonstrated by considering where we are now in combining rhetoric and ethics.

The Present Status of Ethics and Rhetoric

The June, 1982 issue of the scholarly journal Communication was devoted to Ethics of Rhetoric. In an introductory essay Richard L. Johannesen, the editor of this specialized issue, volunteered his interpretation of significant generalizations advanced by the several authors.[2] Johannesen's summary represents a cross-section of authoritative cerebration about ethics in the field of speech-communication as of Spring, 1982. I will examine each of Johannesen's eight statements describing ethical rhetoric and apply the test of operational validity. Specifically, I will ask whether sufficient exceptions to a statement exist to justify us to challenge it as a descriptor of ethical decision making in communication. Since Johannesen did not limit his comments to the United States or to the West, I will extend my operational testing to other cultures. Also, I have taken the liberty of condensing some statements, since several were lengthy and repetitive.

The first generalization cited by Johannesen was this: ethical rhetoric

serves other ends more than it does personal ambition. Is persuasion that serves personal ambition without giving higher priority to other ends necessarily unethical? Not for the former speech teacher applying for a dishwashing job that will enable her/him to survive. While we might agree that under favorable circumstances it would be nice to minimize self interest, there are times when self-needs have entirely legitimate priority.

Johannesen's second generalization: ethical rhetoric acknowledges freedom of choice and of assent. Probably a majority of the world's peoples lack freedom of choice or of assent. I remember the Intourist interpreter in the USSR in 1978 who said, "It is good that people in this country accept Pravda's position on political issues. This brings us together and we can accomplish more than if we were opposing one another in disagreement." Accepting conformity as a value certainly lacks freedom of choice and of assent in the Soviet Union today, but terming such acceptance "unethical" shows little sensitivity to context.

Third, ethical rhetoric is reflexive, that is, it is critical of evidence, reasoning and motives. This third injunction assumes that all ethical decisions are conscious and logical. However, most of us "just know" that something is right or wrong. In many parts of the world, as in the Far East, intuitive ethical judgments are considered more valid than are those resulting from analysis. The post hoc ability to explain logically and justify an ethical decision is, indeed, a dubious criterion of ethical quality.

Fourth, ethical rhetoric uses sound evidence and reasoning. This standard implies that the only way to be ethical is to be consciously logical, as was the case with the third criterion. To say the least, this advice is out-of-date, as we are amassing evidence that holistic,

out-of-awareness decision making is more effective than conscious analytical processes in innovation, invention, creativity and in processing large amounts of information. Cognitive psychologist Paul Johnson studied expert medical diagnosticians and found that they leaped from fragmentary, complex data to accurate diagnoses. His conclusion: ". . . the expert doesn't think logically. It's the neophyte who thinks logically."[3] To conclude that, in order to be ethical, rhetoric must result from conscious manipulation of evidence and reasoning is indeed absurd.

Fifth, ethical rhetoric is bi-lateral, open to self and others. In our culture this rules out protecting another by secrecy, something that may claim high ethical quality. In many cultures it is improper to reveal reasons for a variety of social actions. Closed portions of one's personality are respected, and prying into them is considered grossly improper. The notion that in order to be ethical, the motivation of an act should be apparent to others or even known to self is viable only in the more open regions of the West. Certainly this fifth criterion violates the high priority given to privacy of the person in many cultures.

Sixth, ethical rhetoric is self perpetuating. It leads to "possibility of deliberation on other subjects, and of later deliberation on the disputed subject," says Johannesen.[4] The implied willingness to extend a bit of rhetoric to related matters and to review it at length denies that a decision to end a matter once and for all can be ethical. Frequently, situations provide absolute deadlines for decisions, and such a decision once made often serves immediately as a guide to future action. Reviewing this forced choice should be disastrous, and is usually impossible. Is such a decision ipso facto unethical? Not so, as any manager of a fast moving organizational enterprise will testify. In some cultures the leader's decision is not subject to review. It seems presumptuous to label such

traditional authoritarianism unethical because articulated edicts are not self perpetuating.

Johannesen's seventh generalization, ethical rhetoric embodies an attitude of reasonableness, and his eighth, it uses a logic of good reasons, seem to repeat his items three and four. Seven and eight again insist that only Western, analytical, conscious logic can produce decisions that have a valid claim to ethical quality.

From our review of Johannesen's summation we can conclude: many scholars in contemporary speech communication believe that for people in other cultures to make ethical decisions they must think the way we would like to think we think. Notice I didn't say they demand that others think the way we actually think. That would be an operational requirement. Johannesen's list is prescriptive. His criteria stipulate ideals of our particular Western society. These are the rules we recommend that people follow. Descriptive ethics in our society, the rules derived from the ethical decision-making of persons, are quite another matter.

Rhetoric deals in prescriptive ethics, which tell us little about how the world works. Not only has our preoccupation with prescription kept us from confronting ethical realities, but a more basic confusion has limited our progress in the cross-cultural study of ethics. This is our failure to relate values and ethics productively, at home and abroad.

Values and Ethics Confused

Rhetorical attempts to find universal ethical principles have consisted of a quest for universal values. Rhetoric has looked for conscious priorities such as truth, honor, honesty, patriotism. Starting with Western interpretations of values such as these we have attempted to find them elsewhere. Looking for our values is quite different from identifying values that are produced by a culture and then studying how members of that culture

use these values in the making of satisfying choices.

While values differ cross-culturally, the process of applying values may be similar across cultures. We can examine how people set about being ethical in different contexts and seek out procedural similarities. This requires accepting a fact of life our rhetorical approach resists, that cultures generate their own values which differ from one culture to another.

Ethics, then, are techniques by which we attempt to make certain values work for us appropriately. This process, the ways people try to be ethical, need not be culture-specific. Indeed, carrying ethics across cultures requires identification of methods by which persons anywhere, anytime, can use their values to improve the ethical quality of their choices. To repeat, from this multicultural perspective ethics are the procedures used by human beings to incorporate the values of their cultures into their day-by-day making of decisions.

To summarize the important substance-process distinction we are stipulating, we resort to a favorite rhetorical device, the enthymeme.

Since values differ, any universal in the application of values must be process. To explicate the conclusion implied by the enthymeme:

The processual approach to ethics-in-action examines how particular values are applied to on-going events in the effort to produce ethical decisions. This is done by individuals and by groups. In groups, the process of value-application may be aided or inhibited by communication. Whether individual or group is making a decision, the intent to be ethical is prerequisite to the process of applying societal values. We can say that the INTENT TO BE ETHICAL is a universal first step in the experience of behaving ethically, anywhere and everywhere.

The classic error of rhetoric in dealing with morality has been to confuse ethics and values. Values are conscious priorities. Ethics

apply certain values to assist in making choices. Values are culture-specific. As Parke Burgess puts it succinctly, "A culture is a system of moral demands."[5] Moral demands are values.

Multicultural Processual Elements of Ethics

To seek out ethical practices the first step is to view a culture's value system as a frame of reference. Then the observer can attempt to answer the question, what goes on here that constitutes an effort to be ethical, and what is recognized in this culture as ethical behavior? With this approach one can be truly operational. The investigator describes on-going processes of applying values to belief and action. Here is a preliminary list of processual elements that seem to be viable in any culture.

First, intent. We have mentioned that the desire to conform to the values of one's culture is prerequisite to making an ethical choice. This process of conforming may be thoughtful or habitual. The habit of "living up to" respected values may reinforce and implement the intent to do so. Here an automated ethical pattern of behavior supplies out of awareness intent motivation.

Intent to be ethical may be an individual or group motivation. This ethical responsibility in certain cultures centers in the individual, in others, in the group. Intent, the motivation to believe and act in conformity with the priorities of one's culture, is present to some degree in any individual or group confronting significant choice. Data can be collected on how intent to be ethical functions in any society, hence, this can be said to be an ethical universal.

Second, we can be sure that everywhere there will be a gap between morality and ethics. In any culture the codes of ethical behavior as

officially articulated and approved, the cultures morality, differ from the application of these rules by individuals in their day to day living, the culture's operational ethics. This morality-ethics gap can be documented. Which of the codes are applied quite literally, which are modified and which are largely disregarded? Every culture has its morality-ethics gap, and information as to its nature is helpful in developing understanding of ethical practices in a culture.

Third, individual members of all cultures have four levels in the ethical application of values.

1. What people say they <u>should</u> do.
2. What people <u>say</u> they do.
3. What people <u>do</u>.
4. What people would <u>like</u> to do, but don't.[6]

Everywhere, people verbalize ideals of behavior and admit their failure to live as they know they should. Level #1 is found in the verbalization of "ought" statements (prescription) and level #2 occurs in the individual's description of actual choices, always to some degree a deviation from #1. #2 is pseudo-descriptive. In any culture, when we collect information on #3, what people do, truly descriptive data, these deviate from what people <u>say</u> they do, again to some degree. Yet, what people say they do is closer to actual ethical choices then is #1, what they say they <u>should</u> do.

The realization that verified behavioral choices are not the end of the line in the search for ethical imperatives comes when we recognize that many of us abide by certain moral edicts reluctantly. The person who lives by a value code that contradicts personal convictions in order to keep out of trouble is affected by the dissonance of inner belief and the imposed morality. You can call to mind situations, families,

organizations, subcultures and cultures where a substantial gap exists between what people do and what they would like to do, but don't. The ethical problem of forced choices is illuminated by examination of level #4, what people in a particular context would <u>like</u> to do, but don't.

All four levels of the application of values are significant ethically. Some individuals need only to know the characteristics of virtuous behavior, level #1, to feel good about themselves. Others need to rationalize their decisions through more or less deceptive verbalization to perceive themselves as ethical, level #2. Still others reject interpretation and verbalization as insufficient. These hard-nosed folks inspect actions and derive the values that must have been applied to produce them. Their ethical criteria are based upon level #3. And finally, some persons are profoundly disturbed when required to make decisions by applying values they despise, while some can live with this comfortably, feeling morally secure. How people manage the four levels of the application of values in making ethical decisions in a culture can be a fascinating study. Since the four levels exist in all cultures, this procedure can be termed a universal.

A fourth procedure that can be identified and studied in any culture affects all four levels of the ethical application of values. Do individuals in this context follow group rules of morality rigidly or flexibly? How much latitude is there for appropriate, important behavior? Some societies are forgiving, tolerant of less than perfect conformity to its ideals. Other societies are exacting in their demands, punishing even slight deviations from literal application of respected values. Flexibility or rigidity of interpreting moral norms is important to understanding of how ethics function in a culture. The degree of permissiveness in making ethical judgments is an element which can be quantified in any culture, hence

is another universal.

The fifth and a highly important multicultural element is the criterion of social utility. How important are the welfare of the community and benefit to individuals as guidelines to ethical conduct? Survival of the group is the highest priority in social utility. In contrasting cultures group survival is promoted by application of different values. But the extent to which the welfare of the group enters into the making of ethical decisions needs to be known if one is to develop insight into the ethics of one's own or other cultures. Here, again, is a processual ethical universal.

I have suggested five multicultural processual elements of ethics. Study of these at work in any context will provide descriptive data on how ethical decisions are made. My list does not purport to be exhaustive. Other procedural elements are certain to be identified. These will enable scholars in the future to operate more comprehensively in carrying ethical concepts across cultural boundaries.

Clearly, the procedural investigations I am encouraging yield predominantly descriptive information, data on how ethical choices are actually made. My reader at this point is probably thinking, are there prescriptive universals, on what ideally should be, in any and all cultures? Yes, the operational approach can yield recommended ethical imperatives. Here are procedural guidelines that, if applied, will enable a person to be more ethical, in any context.

Criteria for a Personal System of Ethics

1. It protects the fabric of its culture
2. Responsibility for ethics in interaction is shared
3. It is both pragmatic and idealistic

4. It understands the gap between verbalization and action
5. It accepts relativity in application of cultural values
6. Social utility is considered in every ethical decision[7]

Conclusion

The effort to carry ethical concepts across cultural boundaries has been frustrated by a collosal misunderstanding. We assumed that to be multicultural, we had to accept situational ethics, which we could not bring ourselves to do. Now we know that ethics are not situational, but values are. There is no problem in securing agreement that values in different cultures do indeed differ.

The process of being ethical can be the same everywhere, hence, as philosophers have insisted, ethics are universal. So it is necessary that in future scholarly writing and research the term "situational ethics" be replaced by "situational values." This change will make possible the productive cross-cultural study of ethics.

Footnotes

1. Richard O. Mason and Ian I. Mitroff, Challenging Strategic Planning Assumptions (New York, N.Y.: John Wiley and Sons, 1981), pp. 9-16.

2. Richard L. Johannesen, "Issue Editor's Introduction: Some Ethical Questions in Communication," Communication, 6 (1981), pp. 147-148.

3. Mary Bader Pappa, "Out and About," Twin Cities (April 1982), p. 18.

4. Johannesen, op. cit., p. 147.

5. Parke Burgess, "The Rhetoric of Moral Conflict: Two Critical Dimensions," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (April 1970), p. 126.

6. William S. Howell, The Empathic Communicator (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1982), p. 191.

7. Ibid., p. 197.